

AFTER THE FLOOD: LIFTED UP

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the fourth Sunday in Lent, March 30, 2003.

Scripture: *Numbers 21:4-9*; Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Three years ago, my youngest son, Mark, and I traveled through a portion of the Jordanian not far from where the children of Israel, spoken of in our OT lesson, had become impatient. As we traveled we came, from time to time, upon Bedouin nomads who lived in the desert. How can they survive with so little water or food? How could anybody survive in a desert like this? As I think of that desert I can sympathize with the complaints and impatience of the children of Israel in our OT lesson.

Do you remember how the OT story goes? The children of Israel spoke against God and against Moses saying, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food." In response to their impatience and complaints, God sent poisonous snakes that bit and killed the people. Afraid of dying of snakebite the people repented and confessed their sin. They begged Moses to pray to God on their behalf. Moses prayed for them and the Lord told Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it on a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live."

It's a strange and disturbing story. What do you think of a God who sends poisonous snakes to kill people he loves? I can only tell you how I understand this story. I read the Bible as a Christian. *I read it as one who trusts* that the God of whom the Bible speaks is the God revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. *I read it as one who believes* that God loves the world so much that he came to us in the person of Jesus Christ. *I read it as one who believes* that God doesn't want anyone to perish. *I read it as one who believes* that God will discipline and judge us with far more love and wisdom than any human parent. *(in other words why do I fear God?)*

When Jesus meditated on our Old Testament lesson he focused on the bronze serpent God directed Moses to lift up on a pole. Jesus doesn't explain the problem of sin and suffering. He doesn't explain or blame – he focuses on the solution. So when Jesus meditated on the Old Testament story read this morning he focused on how anyone bitten by a poisonous snake could merely look at the uplifted bronze serpent and be healed.

Think of this strange story as a diamond. Like a diamond, this story has many facets, any one of which I could preach on. *I could preach a sermon defending or excusing God's action* of sending poisonous serpents. *Or I could preach on the danger of complaining.* Complaining not only drains energy from the complainer, but also drains the energy of everyone who has to listen to the complaints. *Or I could preach on the virtue of patience.* We need to pray for God to give us patience and to give us patience *now!* But the facet of the story I'm going to preach about is *the power of an image to convert and save us.* The bronze serpent was such a powerful image that simply looking at it healed a person.

Everyday we're besieged with images. Some images on the Internet, the movies or in magazines are destructive to human life and dignity. For example, yesterday afternoon I went to see "The Sound of Music" performed by the students of Octararo High School (Whitney Bradford playing the mother abbess). At one point a Swastika was projected on the wall of the auditorium. I know it was just a part of the play but the sign aroused powerful negative emotions of hatred and anger. During World War 2 millions of men and women looked to that image for salvation but it led them finally to death and destruction.

Some images may be destructive, but many are wholesome and life giving. When Victor Frankl was imprisoned in Buchenwald the one thing that saved him was the image of his wife etched in his memory. He thought of her! He looked to her in his pain and misery and her image enabled him to survive!

Think of powerful images that have etched themselves into our psyches: the image of the World Trade Center, the image of a fireman carrying a child from the burning rubble, the photograph of a young terrified Vietnamese girl running down a dirt road inflamed in napalm, the black and white photograph a sailor embracing a young girl at the end of World War 2; the raising of the flag on Iwo Jima. Powerful images that have shaped the lives of Americans.

Probably no image has been so powerful to so many people as the image of a man on a cross. No image has changed lives of so many people. Up until the Reformation most churches had a crucifix on the Communion Table. When people came to church the center of attention wasn't the organ or choir but the image

of a man dying on a cross. For nearly two thousand years Christians have found it extremely helpful to meditate on God's suffering love revealed in Jesus Christ uplifted on the cross.

*I look upon that body, writhing, pierced
And torn with nails. And see the battlefields
Of time, the mangled dead, the gaping wounds,
The sweating, dazed survivors stragglng back,
The widows worn and haggard, still dry-eyed,
Because their weight of sorrow will not lift
And let them weep... G.A. Studdert-Kennedy*

Yes! Looking at Christ lifted up on the cross gives us life and heals our souls.

Let me conclude with a story told by a famous French Roman Catholic bishop to his congregation. (I heard the story from Dr. D.T. Niles, a Methodist Evangelist from the nation of Sri Lanka). Three University of Paris students were walking along the road one Good Friday afternoon. They noticed people going to the churches to make their confession of sin before receiving Holy Communion on Easter. The students began to discuss this custom of the "unenlightened," and talked in rather cynical terms about the survival of religion which they described as superstition. Suddenly two of the students turned to the third, who was the leader among them, and said to him, "Will you go into this church and tell the priest what we've been saying to each other?" "Sure, I will," he said, and went in. He stood in the line of those who were going to their confession, and when his turn came, he entered the confessional booth and, looking through the confessional screen at the priest, said, "Father, Christianity is a dying institution and religion is a superstition." The priest looked at the young man and said, "Why come here to tell me this?" The student told him of his friends and how they dared him. The priest listened carefully and then said, "All right, I want you to do one thing for me before you go. You accepted the challenge of your friends and came here; now accept my challenge to you. Walk up to the chancel and you'll find a large wooden cross and on it the figure of Jesus crucified. Stand before that cross and say: 'Jesus died for me and I don't care a damn.'" The student looked diffident but, to save face, agreed. He went up and stood before that cross and said it: "Jesus died for me and I don't care a damn." "Do it once more," said the priest; "after all it means nothing to you." The student when back and looked at the cross for some time and the figure on it, and then he stammered it out: "Jesus died for me and I don't care a damn." He returned to the priest and said, "I've done it; I'm going now." The priest stopped him. "Once more," he said,

“just once more and you can go.” The young man walked up to the chancel and looked at that cross again, and at the Crucified. He stood there for a long time. Then he came back to the priest and said, “Father, can I make my confession now?”

God of all times and places, in Jesus Christ, lifted up on the cross, you opened for us the path to eternal life. Grant that we, being born again of water and the Spirit, may joyfully serve you in newness of life and faithfully walk in your holy ways; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.